

Primary Care Doctors In Highest Demand

BY JANE ANDERSON

Demand for many medical specialists remains strong, and group practices and hospitals are focused on recruiting psychiatrists, family physicians, general internists, hospitalists, and pediatricians. However, primary care physicians are in greater demand than any other kind of doctor, a review of physician recruitment shows.

In "2009 Review of Physician Recruiting Incentives," the physician-recruiting firm Merritt Hawkins & Associates notes that in the past year it handled more requests for family physicians than for any other specialty type.

Requests for primary care physicians between April 2008 and March 2009 increased 23% over the previous year, the Irving, Tex.-based company said.

It added that although insurers and government programs are increasing their focus on primary care, fewer physicians in training are choosing to be generalists.

A spokeswoman for the Medical Group Management Association agreed that primary care physicians are in higher demand than other specialties. She added, however, that MGMA's own surveys show that increases in primary care physicians' incomes overall have not been beating inflation.

On the other hand, the review by Merritt Hawkins, which tracks more than 3,200 physician recruiting assignments, found that salaries offered to newly recruited physicians reflect the increased demand.

According to the company, the average salary or income guarantee offered to family physicians jumped 19 percent in the past 3 years, to \$173,000; the average offered to general internists rose 15 percent, to \$186,000; and the average for pediatricians increased 13 percent, to \$171,000.

David Nyman, manager of physician recruitment at the Marshfield Clinic in Wisconsin, said in an interview that the disparities between salary figures in the MGMA and Merritt Hawkins reports can be explained by the different groups of physicians involved.

Merritt Hawkins tends to take on the "harder" recruitment assignments and therefore can wind up paying physicians more than the average, he said.

Mr. Nyman added that he's seen an increase in the number of groups willing to help new physicians with their student loans as an incentive to sign on. Groups are well aware that few physicians are going into primary care these days, which is driving increased recruitment of generalists, Nyman said.

"People are adding primary physicians now, anticipating that it's going to be more difficult to find them down the road," he said.

Mark Smith, president of Merritt Hawkins, echoed Mr. Nyman's sentiment about the enormous demand for primary care physicians.

"Virtually every hospital or large medical group in the United States would be happy to add a family physician or general internist," Mr. Smith said in a statement. "There simply are not enough primary care doctors to go around."

Demand is also robust for hospitalists, the report said, and that may be hurting primary care. Because many internists are choosing to practice as hospitalists, the supply of physicians for general internal medicine has been constrained, the report concluded.

Meanwhile, demand is strong for various specialists, particularly general surgeons, the Merritt Hawkins report found. General surgeons are becoming increasingly hard to recruit because fewer medical school graduates who choose surgery are opting for the full range of that specialty, the report said.

More than 40 percent of general surgeons are 55 or older, and many are retiring, the report said. Merritt Hawkins said it conducted nearly twice as many general surgery searches for clients in 2008-2009 as it did the previous year.

Psychiatry faces a similar situation, the report said, with demand for psychiatrists strong and many practicing psychiatrists near retirement.

Other specialty areas experiencing robust demand include orthopedic surgery, obstetrics/gynecology, cardiology, urology, pulmonology, gastroenterology, otolaryngology, hematology/oncology, dermatology, neurology, and emergency medicine.

The search firm reported that 85% of all physicians were offered signing bonuses in 2008-2009, compared with just 58% 3 years ago. The average signing bonus offered to all physicians last year was \$24,850. The report also suggested that more hospitals are hiring physicians as employees and paying them salaries. In 2005-2006, 23% of the physician-search assignments Merritt Hawkins handled involved physician employment by a hospital. In 2008-2009, that number increased to 45% percent.

"Many physicians today are simply throwing in the towel when it comes to private practice," Mr. Smith of Merritt Hawkins said in the statement. "They are exchanging independence for the relative simplicity and security of employment." ■

Demand for psychiatrists is strong, and many psychiatrists are nearing retirement. Other specialty areas experiencing robust demand include neurology and cardiology.

POLICY & PRACTICE



**CAN'T GET ENOUGH POLICY & PRACTICE?
CHECK OUT OUR NEW PODCAST EACH MONDAY.
egmblog.wordpress.com**

Barriers to Care in New Orleans

Four years after Hurricane Katrina, children in New Orleans are still at risk for mental health problems and yet continue encountering barriers to care, according to a July report by the Government Accountability Office. The GAO estimated that some 187,000 children were living in the four parishes that make up the metro area, and that a "substantial number of these children may need referrals for mental health services." Lack of providers and lack of funding continuity were cited as barriers to providing services, along with transportation problems, competing family priorities, and concerns about stigma. Federal grants have helped, but aren't enough, said GAO. Sen. Joseph Lieberman (I-Conn.) and Sen. Mary Landrieu (D-La.) requested the study.

Violence Against Women Is Focus

The Obama administration has named Lynn Rosenthal, a national expert on domestic violence policy, the first-ever White House adviser on violence against women. She will advise the president and vice president and will work with federal agencies on their domestic violence and sexual assault prevention programs. She also will consult advocacy groups and members of Congress to develop new policies. Ms. Rosenthal served most recently as the executive director of the New Mexico Coalition Against Domestic Violence. The White House announcement said she was a major advocate for reauthorizations of the Violence Against Women Act of 2000 and of 2005 and helped states and communities implement the legislation.

Malpractice Payments Are Down

Medical malpractice payments were at record low levels in 2008, according to an analysis by the consumer-advocacy group Public Citizen. For the third straight year, 2008 saw the lowest number of malpractice payments since the federal government's National Practitioner Data Bank began tracking such data in 1990, the group said. The data showed that 11,037 payments were made last year, which Public Citizen said was nearly one-third lower than the historical average. The monetary value of payments was either the lowest or second lowest since 1990, depending on how inflation was calculated, the group said. The total cost of all malpractice insurance premiums fell to much less than 1% of the total \$2.1 trillion in annual health costs in 2006 (the most recent year for which full data were available). The cost of actual malpractice payments to patients fell to 0.2% of overall health costs, the group said. David Arkush, director of Public Citizen's Congress Watch division,

said in a statement that the numbers indicate that many victims of medical malpractice receive no compensation for their injuries.

Early Schizophrenia to Be Studied

Funds provided to the National Institute of Mental Health by the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act are going to pay for a large-scale trial to determine whether early and aggressive treatment reduces the symptoms and prevents deterioration in functioning in people with chronic schizophrenia. The NIMH announced the launch of the Recovery After an Initial Schizophrenia Episode (RAISE) trial in late July to see whether early, diverse, and individually targeted treatment will help people return to work and school. The interventions "will be designed from the outset to be readily adopted in real-world health care settings and quickly put into practice," said NIMH director Thomas R. Insel in a statement. The research will be led by Dr. John M. Kane at the Zucker Hillside Hospital in Manhasset, N.Y., and by Dr. Jeffrey Lieberman at the Research Foundation for Mental Hygiene in New York.

Many Young Adults Uninsured

About 5 million adults aged 19-23 years in the United States had no health insurance in 2006 for the entire year, and 30% of them said they did not think it was worth the cost, according to the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality. The AHRQ found that 46% of uninsured young adults worked full time and 26% worked part time. Only 19% of those who were uninsured throughout 2006 were full-time students, the agency said. In addition, 19- to 23-year-olds who were uninsured for the entire year were only about half as likely as those who had insurance part of the year to have a usual source of care, such as a family doctor—just 36% of the wholly uninsured reported a usual source of care.

FDA Seeks Tobacco Comments

The Food and Drug Administration wants public input on how to implement its new authority to regulate tobacco products. In a Federal Register notice, the agency said it would rely on public comments when implementing the new Family Smoking Prevention and Tobacco Control Act and when establishing the FDA Center for Tobacco Products. It said it is interested in suggestions for reducing tobacco use and protecting public health, but that remarks on any aspect of its new regulatory authority are welcome. Comments can be submitted at regulations.gov. They will be accepted until Sept. 29 and will be posted online.

— Alicia Ault